

## The Void

A couple of weeks before Halloween last year, my wife and I had some friends over. I don't remember who started it now, but after several beers we all began sharing scary stories with each other. There were all supposed to be true. I don't know how many were. They ranged from stories about toilets flushing on their own to someone who claimed to have seen their grandfather's ghost standing at the foot of their bed one morning. I told a story about hearing a door slam shut in my parents' house but never being able to determine where it came from. We're all nearly 30 now, so none of this stuff was scaring anyone, but we were drunk and having a good time. One story did scare me, though. I think it unsettled most of us. I'd been friends with Josh for almost 15 years. I'd been concerned about him for a while, but what he told us that night scared me.

I told my wife after he left that I should see about getting him some help. She said that he was just drunk and kidding around. I don't know if I believed that. I kept meaning to set something up for him, make an appointment or whatever, but I put it off for months. I didn't talk to Josh for a long time after that. But honestly I was embarrassed for him. He'd really fallen apart in the last 6 or 7 years. He'd put on a lot of weight, developed a pretty bad dependency on various pills (xanax, vicodin, whatever he could get his hands on) and become reclusive.

At one point, he'd had a pretty bright future ahead of him. He came from a rich family, but he was still a hardworking guy. He was smart and funny. He was going to a prestigious college. But he dropped out of college his senior year. He got into drugs, his mom died and a bunch of other shit. He got arrested a couple of times, but I'm not sure what for. He couldn't hold down a job. In fact, a few days before he came over to our house that night, his car had been repossessed.

About 3 months ago, Josh took a bunch of muscle relaxers and I'm not sure what else. He was still alive when they found him. He died the next day. When I visited him in the hospital, he was really

out of it. It was the first time I'd seen him since last October. I felt pretty fucking guilty, but I didn't tell him that. I don't know that he even would have understood it. It didn't seem like he was aware of what was going on. I wished that I had done something to help him earlier. But I didn't know what to do and I guess I was just too busy to be a decent friend. I told him I was sorry. He turned away from me and mumbled something a few times. It sounded like, "covered in shame" or "covered in his shame" or "covered in his shape."

The story he told that night last October was a big warning sign. I don't know if it was schizophrenia or that the drug use had fried his brain or what. But something was wrong. His story was about how a "void" had entered him one night, and ever since then his brain or soul was corrupted. I thought he was joking at first and so did everyone else. But the more he talked about it, the more I felt that he really believed the story. I'd known Josh for a long time, and I could tell that he was nervous about sharing this. But it was almost like he had to unburden himself. I don't know what the guy was going through at that time. I wish I had asked him more. But we'd grown apart after college, and sometimes it seemed like he was avoiding me. I don't know if my success made him uncomfortable or if he felt like he'd disappointed me or if maybe he just didn't like me anymore. All of that made me reluctant to get involved.

I actually remember the night that his story took place. And I can unequivocally state that no floating "blindspots" entered him. It was the night of Emily Robinson's going away party. She was moving to Seattle. There was a park near Emily's apartment where we had parked our car. We left the party and walked back to our cars. It was probably a little after 2am. There was a stone wall that about 4 feet tall that passed down one side of the park. I'd heard that it was built during the Civil War, but someone told me that it was built in the 1930's by the WPA.

I'll tell the rest as Josh told it to us that night, though it is in contradiction to my memory. Josh said that he had climbed over the wall take a piss. I had stayed by the cars and smoked a

cigarette. There was a steep slope on the other side of the stone wall. It led down to a creek maybe 10 or 15 feet below the parking area. Josh said that he'd gone down to that creek to piss, but that he'd seen something upstream from him. He described it as a dark grey light, but then said it looked more like a floating blindspot. He was frozen as soon as he saw it. When he tried to shout up to me, nothing came out. He said it just sort of floated over to him and passed right through. He gestured with his hands as if the thing had passed directly through his chest and kept moving down the creek.

As he was telling this story, it made me very uncomfortable and a little scared. Like I said, I remembered that night. And it worried me that his version was so different from mine. It didn't strike me at first what was different, but I realized that he'd switched our perspectives. It was surreal to hear this warped retelling of what happened that night. His decline must have started much earlier than I thought.

Josh said that after that night, he knew that something inside of him had changed. He said that thing had left something inside him or maybe taken something out. He wasn't sure which. He told us that even though no one else could see how he'd changed, he could see it. Soon everyone would see it. He wished that he didn't know, but he did. There were so many weird things about his story, that I didn't realize until later how odd it was that he said we couldn't see how he'd changed. If there was anything about Josh that we could all see, it was that he'd changed considerable in the last half-decade. He insisted that things were just going to get worse and quickly. His face was full of frustration; it was like there was so much more he wanted to tell us but didn't know how. Or maybe he could tell we didn't believe it.

I should have done something after that night. He was delusional and distressed. I let him down. He left a note when he died. He said that he would miss us, but he was glad to be gone. He said that he was sorry but he couldn't face what was coming. I try to find some peace in that. Still, I can't pretend that I'm blameless. By the end, I'd known for nearly a year that he was

completely insane. I should have told him that night last October that he wasn't even the one that jumped over the stone wall. I knew his story wasn't true. I'd gone down to the creek to piss. He'd stayed by the cars to smoke. I remember that specifically because I saw something that looked like a minie ball bullet like they used in the Civil War while I was pissing. My dad had bought me one when I was a kid. I picked it up and looked at it closer. It turned out to just be a smooth, oblong rock with some small grooves etched in it, but I kept it anyways. I've still got it today.